



Telemedicine

Phone and Video
Consultations

A guide for patients



Comhairle na nDochtúirí Leighis
Medical Council

This booklet aims to help you understand what is involved in a telemedicine consultation. It explains how such consultations work, what you can expect from a telemedicine consultation with a doctor and what you can do in preparation for the consultation and as part of the consultation to help ensure the doctor can provide you with the appropriate care.

The booklet also explains the Medical Council's role in maintaining a high standard of healthcare and it should be read along with *Working with your doctor: useful information for patients.*

This booklet has been written for patients and the public. It is not part of the doctor's ethical guide.



What is telemedicine?

Telemedicine is the use of technology such as telephones, websites, apps, Zoom and Skype by a registered medical practitioner, to provide healthcare services to patients.

Why might telemedicine be used?



Your doctor may suggest telemedicine as an option for you to get the supportive care you require when seeking treatment or advice. Your doctor may use it to minimise exposure, to you and to other patients that may be more acutely ill than you, and this is especially relevant to current circumstances surrounding COVID-19.

Your doctor may consider a phone pre-screening with you in the first instance to determine whether you can be treated using telemedicine, or whether you may be required to attend in person for a face-to-face consultation. Your doctor might need to find out from you whether you could have been exposed to COVID-19 and if you have been showing signs of a cough, fever, shortness of breath or breathing difficulties.

Your doctor may decide to proceed with a telemedicine consultation to assess and diagnose your health concerns in the same way as if you were face-to-face, and to proceed without delay to further tests or investigation or they may advise you to attend in person for a physical examination.

Will the doctor ask for my consent when using telemedicine?

Your doctor should make sure that you have given your consent to conduct the consultation through telemedicine and consent to any treatment provided.



Your doctor should explain to you that there are aspects of telemedicine that are different to traditional medical practice – for example, a consultation through telemedicine does not involve a physical examination. In the absence of a physical examination, your doctor may need to use audio and video technology during the consultation to assist them in their decision making. Your doctor may suggest you could send in a photograph of a physical sign such as a rash to help the diagnostic process.

What happens to my personal information?

Your GP/family doctor, a hospital doctor or a consultant will keep notes of the consultation to include in your medical file in the same way they would in a face-to-face consultation.

In relation to online telemedicine services, your doctor must keep your health information private and secure and may ask you to use a specific app or other technology to ensure you are protected.



If you're using an online service or app, take the time to read and understand the privacy policy.

You may be asked if you agree to the terms and conditions of the policy when you sign up. The best policies are written in plain language and are easy to understand. If you feel that you do not understand the content, you might want to reconsider whether or not you are comfortable using the service.

Your doctor should tell you if your information is to be shared with any other healthcare professionals as part of your ongoing care. They must also comply with the Data Protection Act 2018 and ensure your personal information is stored and processed in line with the *seven key principles of GDPR*.

What do I need to take part in a telemedicine consultation?

Many services are now offering appointments using a video call. You might be sent an appointment letter from the hospital or receive an e-mail, call or text message from your family doctor or another service.

To have a video call with a doctor you need:



- ▶ A device like a smart-phone, computer, tablet or laptop



- ▶ A reasonable internet connection (if you can watch a video online, e.g. Youtube, then you should be able to have a video call)



- ▶ Web-camera, speakers and microphone (these are normally built into the device you are using)



- ▶ A private, well-lit area that is quiet and where you will not be disturbed

It's important that you speak to your healthcare provider if you need more information or help in using this type of service.

How do I prepare for a telemedicine consultation?



Choose a private space

Finding privacy can sometimes be difficult, especially if you live with other people. Before your appointment, choose a quiet room and try to ensure you are not disturbed.

Consider technical aspects

Whether you're using a phone, smartphone, computer or tablet, it's recommended that you check with the doctor's practice or clinic as to what may be required for the consultation when requesting an appointment. This will help ease any stress or worry you might have about any technical issues.

Prepare your medical history

Be sure to gather relevant information regarding your medical history ahead of time.

Your doctor may also ask you questions about your lifestyle, job and family life and, if appropriate, your mental health history.

Like with face to face consultations, the purpose of the appointment is to provide you with the best possible care and treatment. Sharing personal details allows your doctor to diagnose and provide quality care.

Have your information ready

Like any doctor's appointment, you should be ready with the following pieces of information:

- ▶ Your list of prescriptions, over-the-counter medications and supplements.
- ▶ Your pharmacy name and address.
- ▶ Your GP/family doctor's name and contact info.
- ▶ Health Insurance or credit/debit card information.

Jot down questions to ask

It's natural for a doctor's appointment to make you a little nervous and you may forget to ask crucial questions during your visit. That's why it's recommended to make a note of your symptoms and questions to ask your doctor.

Write down your treatment plan

If possible, take notes on the treatment plan and what your next steps are during the appointment.

What is involved in a telemedicine consultation?

During the consultation the doctor will ask about your health concerns, take a history (the background story and its context) from you and conduct an appropriate examination. The doctor may request diagnostic tests if considered necessary and may suggest referring you to another doctor for further treatment. As part of the consultation the doctor should provide you with a possible diagnosis and explain the plan of management including the benefits and risks of treatment options if a treatment is suggested, and ensure there is appropriate follow-up.

If the doctor prescribes medication for you as part of your treatment it is important that you tell the doctor if you have any allergies; also let them know what other medications you are taking.



Your prescription will be sent, securely, electronically to your nominated pharmacy of choice where you can collect your medications.

The doctor should also advise you what to do in case of an emergency or if you need medical attention between appointments.

What kind of doctors use telemedicine?



A telemedicine consultation can be used by many different doctors, for example: you may have a telemedicine consultation with your GP/family doctor, a hospital doctor or a consultant. Your doctor may refer you to a consultant or another healthcare professional for a telemedicine consultation, or your doctor may have a telemedicine consultation with another doctor or healthcare professional in order for them to consider your healthcare needs. Your doctor will provide additional information to the other healthcare professional if your issue is being referred onwards or referred back.

What should I do if I use commercial/online telemedicine services?

There are many providers offering telemedicine consultations, for example private health insurance companies and online doctor services.

Here are some tips when using these services:

- ▶ Check to see if the doctor is registered with the Medical Council
- ▶ You can check the register online at www.medicalcouncil.ie/public-information/check-the-register/
- ▶ If you make contact with a doctor who is not your GP, make sure you tell the doctor the name of your GP
- ▶ Ask the doctor to send a note to your GP so that your medical record is kept up to date

You can also ask for a summary record of your care from online doctor services and provide it to your GP yourself. That way, your doctors will better understand your medical needs and coordinate their care for you. This is particularly important if you have multiple sources of medical care such as different clinics or out of hours care.

Patients have the best outcomes when their care is coordinated, so it's really important to tell your GP if you're receiving care or advice from any other doctor, or any prescriptions from any other source regardless of format or location. Do not be embarrassed to do this, it is important for your safety.



Is there a cost for telemedicine services?

Telemedicine consultation fees are set by your doctor or health service provider. These fees are often in line with normal consultations and Medical Cards and GP visit cards can be used. There is no charge for a COVID-19 telemedicine consultation.

Private online doctor services and apps often do charge patients directly, either on a pay-per-visit basis or through a monthly fee. Pricing information may be posted on the website or app. Private health insurance may help pay these costs for patients with coverage.

If you're unclear about fees or insurance coverage, ask for more information before providing your payment information or using the service.



How can I tell if the doctor is registered with the Medical Council in Ireland?

If you are getting treatment or advice using a telemedicine service from a doctor, if you wish you can check if they are registered with the Medical Council by visiting



www.medicalcouncil.ie/public-information/check-the-register/

What should I do if I have concerns about the telemedicine service being provided by a doctor?

If you have concerns about the service you received you should consider discussing with the doctor in the first instance as it may have arisen from a misunderstanding, pressure of time or poor communication. You may also contact a manager at a doctor's practice or clinic in order to make them aware of your concern and to have it resolved rapidly. Many clinics encourage you to complete a complaint form and will respond to you formally in writing with an explanation after they gather the facts of the matter. Some clinics will offer you an appointment to meet with the doctor or receptionist for an explanation, sometimes in the company of another member of staff if you wish.

Anyone can make a complaint to the Medical Council about a doctor who is registered in Ireland. This includes members of the public, employers and other healthcare professionals. The

Medical Council can only act where complaints are of a serious nature and raise concerns over a doctor's fitness to practise.

The Medical Council regulates doctors only. It does not deal with complaints against nurses, dentists or other healthcare professions, hospitals or clinics. The Medical Council cannot pay you compensation or help you make a claim for compensation.

To check if a doctor is on our register please visit our website at: www.medicalcouncil.ie/public-information/check-the-register/

You may want to consider making your complaint locally in the first instance, to the doctor directly or to the healthcare institution. Most complaints can be dealt with locally at the place where you received care.

We hope you found this booklet useful and that it has helped you understand what is involved in a telemedicine consultation and about our role as the Medical Council.



If you have further questions about the Medical Council, please visit our website at:
www.medicalcouncil.ie

Notes

The Medical Council regulates medical doctors in the Republic of Ireland. The Council's purpose is to protect the public by promoting and better ensuring high standards of professional conduct and professional education, training and competence among doctors. The Medical Council's remit centres around the core principle of protecting patients and supporting doctors.

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